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ABSTRACT

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Ability Grouping and Students' Self-Esteem*

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Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, August 1979.

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Ability Grouping and Students' Self-Esteem

Abstract

Past research on the effects of ability grouping on students' self-esteem have produced mixed results. This may be due to the fact that at least three distinct processes are involved: across-group comparisons, within-group comparisons, and the perceived evaluations of teachers. The extent to which the group structure is visible is likely to determine, in part, the relative impact of these processes. Data from a first-grade classroom based mainly on interviews with students, indicates that when awareness of group differences in ability is low, within-group comparisons and teacher evaluations have more effect on students' academic self-esteem than do across-group comparisons. The implications of these results for future research in this area are discussed.

Although the effect of ability grouping on students' self-esteem has been the subject of much research, studies which have examined this effect have resulted in more confusion than clarification regarding this issue. Studies of both within-classroom and across-classroom grouping[1] have found that assignment to a high group significantly increased children's self-esteem while assignment to a low group did not (Weinstein, 1976; Alexander and McDill, 1976). Likewise, Borg (1966) found that low ability pupils had lower self-concepts in ability-grouped schools than in non-grouped schools. On the other hand, Goldberg, Passow and Justman (1966) found that low ability pupils had higher self-ratings in narrow ability groupings than in broad ability groupings.

One reason for these mixed findings is that, not one, but several different processes may account for the influence of ability grouping on students' academic self-esteem. One process which is likely to occur concerns across-group comparisons. According to Festinger (1954), people evaluate their abilities through comparisons with others. Since the groups ostensibly represent different levels of abilities they provide a basis for social comparison. However before such comparisons can occur students must first become aware of group differences and the relative standing of the group to which they belong a process which depends on the visibility of grouping. In addition, students may compare themselves with other members of their group. This second process of within-group comparisons will result in different information which for some students will conflict with the information gained from across-group comparisons. Finally, there is a tendency for self-evalustions to reflect the evaluations of significant others (Mead, 1934; Videbeck, 1960). Thus the teacher's evaluations of students are also likely to influence their self-esteem. To the extent that these evaluations differ across groups, yet a third process may be involved. This paper will demonstrate theimportance of considering all three of these processes when examining the impact of ability grouping on students' self-esteem.

In order to examine the different modes by which within-classroom grouping influences students' self-esteem, a first-grade classroom was studied intensively for a one-year period.[2] While participant observation was used to determine the nature of the processes involved, more systematic methods were also employed to determine the relative impact of these processes in this classroom. (These methods will be discussed in detail in a later section.) By focusing on the different means by which ability grouping affects self-esteem, the contradictory findings of previous research will be clarified and important questions for future research will be identified.

Group Membership and Self-Perceptions

Membership in a group ostensibly formed on the basis of a specific trait often results in others perceiving that each member does in fact possess that trait. Thus, membership acts as a signal to others, conveying information about group members. This may occur even when group traits are not made explicit as in the case of high school tracks. Rosenbaum (1976) found that, although tracks were supposed to represent common interests such as an interest in attending college, different traits were attributed to students in different tracks. While students in the college track were characterized as being "smart" and "hardworking", students in the non-college track were described as being unmotivated ("lazy", "goof-offs"), negativistic, and "not smart" (or "stupid").

Group membership may also signal information to the members themselves. This is particularly likely to occur in the case of nonvoluntary groups. For example, assignment to an alcoholic ward in a hospital may provide patients with information regarding their own alcoholism of which they were previously unaware. Similarly, assignment to a high ability group may provide members with new information regarding their ability level. In both of these cases, membership occurred, not because the members had sought out a group which represents a characteristic they had, but because another person perceived the individual and group to have something in common.

Once assigned to a group, members may come to see themselves as having the ostensible characteristics of the group's members. Thus, children assigned to high ability groups may come to view themselves as having high ability while those assigned to low ability groups may view themselves as having low ability. This could occur either because students are influenced by the teacher's perception of their ability as reflected in her assignment of them or as a result of the general tendency to see themselves as similar to other group members. In either case, actual ability is not taken into consideration. Thus, if students are misassigned for some reason, they may view themselves as having more or less ability than they actually have. This, in turn, is likely to affect their academic performances, with students who view themselves as having more ability performing better than students who perceive their ability to be relatively low.

The Visibility of Grouping

Before children can use ostensible group traits as a basis for self perception they must become aware of these traits. When groups are named according to their respective traits, these

characteristics are obvious. However, while ability groups are referred to as high, middle, or low groups in discussions with adults (parents, other teachers, administrators, etc.), they are generally given nondescriptive names for classroom use. For example, the groups may be named after colors or after animals. While group traits are generally not indicated by classroom names they may be reflected in the way in which teachers refer to groups; for example, setting the high group up as a model for the entire class (Weinstein, 1976). Many teachers, however, attempt to minimize group differences when talking with children, explaining grouping in terms of its organizational function rather than in terms of ability differences.

Despite the lack of direct information regarding group traits, most children at some point become aware of ability differences between groups. In one study of fifth graders, over one-third identified their group by ability level rather than by the name given by the teacher and over half mentioned ability or achievement factors when asked how they happened to be in that particular group (Mann, 1960).

How do children become aware of group differences when many teachers are careful to keep such information from them? While little is known empirically about the process by which students obtain such information, certain factors related to the visibility of grouping are expected to influence the extent of awareness of their group assignment (Sørensen, 1970; Richer, 1976). The first of these factors concerns the degree of differentiation between groups (Richer, 1976). Groups may be differentiated in terms of work materials, with students in different groups using different books. They may also be physically separated with members of the same group sitting together in the classroom or with entire groups assigned to separate classrooms, as is the case in across-classroom grouping. In general, the greater the differentiation between groups, the greater their visibility and the more likely students will be aware of group characteristics.

A second factor concerns the complexity of the grouping organization and, specifically, the number of levels.[3] According to Richer (1976), the fewer distinctions in level, the greater the visibility, making a two-level organization the most visible. In addition, visibility is likely to be influenced by the extent to which group lessons can be observed by non-group members. Since differences in either teacher instruction or student performance would suggest group differences, the opportunity to observe lessons of other groups is likely to increase student awareness. This suggests that within-classroom grouping would be more visible than across-classroom grouping. However, since across-classroom grouping generally involves greater physical differentiation, it is unclear which form of grouping is more visible over all.

Social Comparison Processes

As students obtain information about group differences they simultaneously compare the status of their group relative to others. Thus, when children engage in comparisons of reading books, not only do they discover differences between groups, they also gain information about the level of their book relative to that of books used by other groups. Similarly, when students observe differences in academic performance across groups, they at the same time gain information about the performance level of their group relative to others. According to Festinger (1954), social comparisons such as these provide an important means of evaluating our own abilities.

Besides comparing themselves with members of other groups, students also compare themselves with members of their own groups. Indeed, while the opportunity to observe group lessons may give some students information on performance differences across groups, all students are likely to receive information about performance differences within groups. The more lesson time that is spent in oral performance, the more information students will have.

Information obtained from within-group comparison is not analogous to that obtained from across-group comparison. While the latter process provides information which suggests that members of the highest groups are the most able, regardless of their relative standing within the group; the former process implies that the best performers in each group are the most able students in the class. Even though these two types of information differ, they will coincide for some students. Thus, in the case of ability-based reading groups, the best readers in the high group, the average readers in the middle group, and the low readers in the low group would all receive comparable information from both processes. On the other hand, other students would receive contradictory information if both processes were operating. For example, the poorest readers in the high group would receive some information that would indicate their ability is low and other information which would indicate their ability is high. Good readers in the low group would also be faced with conflicting information.

Because the two processes provide different information to some students, grouping is expected to have a differential effect on student self-concept depending on which processes are operating, and if both are operating, which is predominant. If the visibility of grouping is high, across-group comparison is likely to predominate and the students in the highest groups are likely to have greater academic self-esteem, regardless of their within-group standing. If the visibility of grouping is low, within-group comparison is likely to predominate and the best readers in each group are likely to have greater self-esteem in academic areas.

The fact that ability grouping is likely to have a differential effect on academic self-esteem depending on which process is predominant provides one explanation for the contradictory findings in this area. Those studies which found that members of low groups had relatively lower self-concepts were carried out in schools where grouping was part of the school's normal procedures and thus more likely to be visible (Borg, 1964; Weinstein, 1976; Alexander and McDill, 1976). On the other hand, the study by Goldberg, et al. (1966) involved the deliberate formation of a number of classrooms varying in their range of ability from a very narrow to a very broad range. The visibility of grouping in the latter study is likely to be less both because of its greater complexity and because of its unfamiliarity to students, making within-group comparisons more predominant.

Teacher Evaluation

Besides being influenced by comparison processes, students' self-evaluations are also likely to be affected by the perceptions which they believe others have of them. The general tendency for people to view themselves as they think others see them is a basic element of symbolic interactionist theory (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902) and has been supported empirically (Videbeck, 1960). Particularly important in shaping an individual's self-conception are the perceived evaluations of significant others, (Sullivan, 1953). Children's teachers, along with their parents, tend to occupy a central position in their lives although this position is likely to face competition from peers in later years. Several studies have shown a position relationship between students' self-concepts and their perceptions of the teacher's evaluation (Davidson and Lang, 1960; Brookover, Sailor, and Paterson, 1964).

One way in which we determine the perceptions held by others is to note their behavior toward us (Mead, 1934). Thus children are likely to rely on the teacher's praise as an indicator of how (s)he evaluates their academic ability. Although praise has been found to correlate with ability level in several studies, the relationship has been shown to exist in both directions. While some studies show high ability students getting more praise (Pobovits and Maehr, 1971; Brophy and Good, 1970), other studies have found that low ability group members received more praise (Weinstein, 1976). In the former case, praise is likely to correlate with actual performance; while, in the latter case, the teacher may be using praise to encourage slower students to try harder. Since teachers vary in regard to their primary use of praise for either reward or encouragement, it is impossible to predict whether praise will correspond with group level and, if it does, in which direction. However, if there is a relation between praise and group level it could either magnify or offset the influence of comparison processes on students' self-concepts.

In summary, the degree to which students' ability-group membership affects their self-esteem is expected to depend on the extent to which they are aware of group differences. Specifically, if awareness is high, members of higher groups are likely to have higher self-esteem than are members of lower groups. On the other hand, if awareness is low, the high standing members within each group are expected to have higher self-esteem than the low standing members. Furthermore, if members of higher groups and high standing members within groups receive more praise from the teacher, their self-esteem is expected to be further increased. However, if more praise is given to members of lower students and low standing members within groups, the influence of comparison processes is expected to be offset.

Methods

In-depth interviews with students were used to determine the degree of student awareness regarding group differences. These interviews were conducted during the first, fifth, and eighth months of the school year by an experienced interviewer who was neither aware of the students' group assignment nor of the research questions behind this study. The following questions were asked: "Do you read altogether or do you have reading groups?" "Is there any difference between the groups?" If differences between books were not specifically mentioned, they were asked: "Do all the groups use the same book?" If answered "no", they were then asked: "Is there any difference between the books?" During the last interview, students were also asked the following questions: "If a new student came to your class who was a really good reader what group would they be in?" "If a student came to your class who was having trouble with reading, what group would they be in?"[4] The answers to these questions were then coded as to whether or not any differences in the ranking of the groups were mentioned (i.e., high-low or ahead-behind distinctions) and as to whether or not ability-related differences, such as the reading performance of students or degree of difficulty of the books used, were mentioned.

Determining the extent of student awareness was made problematic by an attempt to discover the knowledge which students currently possessed without providing them with new information. Thus, more direct questions such as "Do some groups have better readers than others?" were avoided since they might give students more information than they already possessed. However, since the questions used did not ask for specific information in a direct manner, it is possible that some students did not report all the relevant information which they did have.

Academic self-esteem was measured in the spring interview using eight questions from Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory (1967) which pertain directly to academic self-image (Items 2, 7, 14, 15, 21, 28, 35, 42). This scale was designed as a written questionnaire for third-grade and older students, but has also been used in an interview format with first-graders (Weinstein, 1976). While the longer version of this scale has been found to be very reliable, the shorter version used here is likely to be less reliable, particularly when the age of the students is considered. Also, as with many measures of self-esteem, social desirability is a potential problem (Robinson and Shorer, 1973).

Each student's relative standing within his or her group and teacher praise were coded from video-taped reading lessons. To determine relative standing, a measure of amount of difficulty per student was first computed by counting the number of mistakes, pauses, and omissions made by each student while reading aloud during three lessons in March and April, and dividing that number by the number of lines read.[5] Each group was then divided in half, with those members having less difficulty considered as having high relative standing and those having more difficulty considered as having low standing. (Where there was an uneven number of students in a group, the middle one was assigned low standing.) Finally, teacher praise was computed by dividing the incidence of praise both by the number of lines read and by the number of students who read during the lesson. Praise was coded for twelve lessons in the Fall and twelve in the Spring, (a total of six lessons per group).

Awareness of Group Differences

When the students were first asked about group differences several mentioned the fact that the groups used different books. However, no mention of differences in either rank or ability was made during the first interview. By mid-year seven students were aware of group differences in ranking (see Table 1). For example, a member of the high group reported this: "We're the best group because we're the faress (sic) ones in Ups and Downs. But some people still are in Amigos because they're kinda early--cuz they're just not ahead. They're just way down below us and we're ahead."

An important event occurred between the first and second interview, i.e., the groups finished their first reading book and moved on to the next level in their series. After this occurred, many students in the higher groups picked up on the fact that students in other groups were using books which their group had already had and informed them of this fact with comments such as the following: "I've read that book; it was cinchy." and "We're past that; we're past that." With this, some students began to develop a notion of some groups being "ahead of" or "behind" other groups. One particularly astute child also noted the permanent nature of this relative ranking: "Soon as they catch us, they read the same book as us. Except they're always going to be behind us in reading."

By the spring interview, several more students had become aware of rank-related differences. Between this interview and the last one, many students had discovered that the levels of their books were printed on their book covers. Thus groups were now also referred to as being at a "higher" or "lower" level than others.

While most students who were aware of group differences only mentioned differences in rank, five students also mentioned some ability-related differences during the spring interview. According to a high group member: "Some groups can't read books as good as (us)--they usually miss the words more than our group does. Our group is the only reading group that could discover words we've never seen before." This student mentioned that he had discovered this by

observing the lessons of other groups which was relatively easy for him to do since his assigned sect was near the reading group for part of the year. Some of the other students who mentioned ability-related differences between groups had been a member of more than one reading group during the year and thus had also had the opportunity to listen to performances in other groups.

While higher group members reported somewhat greater awareness of group differences, two members of the low group mentioned differences in rank. The comments of one suggest some confusion as to the exact order of ranking, implying that her group is the medium low rather than the low group: "Some are lower and some are higher reading groups. They're in a higher reading group and we're not up to that yet and (the) lower reading group is not up to us yet." This confusion could have been due to the relative complexity of the group structure in this classroom. However, another low group member was not mistaken about the order, reporting: "Tigers are the highest. We're the lowest reading group."

Thus while approximately half of the students mentioned rank-related differences between groups by the end of the year, only five students reported differences in ability. This relatively low degree of awareness regarding group differences is likely to be due in part to the relatively low visibility of reading groups in this classroom. To begin with, only a few students had the opportunity to observe the performance of students in other groups. Secondly, the fact that there were four groups representing four levels of ability made the group structure fairly complex. Finally, the students did not remain seated with other members throughout the day, meeting together only for reading group lessons. The main factor which contributed to the visibility of the groups was the differentiation of work materials. However, in this classroom this appeared to contribute mainly to awareness of rank-related, rather than ability-related, differences between groups.

Effect of Ability Grouping on Students' Self-Esteem

It was predicted that, if awareness of group differences was low, within-group comparisons would have a stronger influence on self-esteem than would across-group comparisons. While there was some awareness of group differences in this classroom it was relatively low suggesting that within-group comparisons should have the stronger impact on self-esteem of the two comparison processes. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that while high group members did not have consistently higher self-esteem than low group members (in fact, members of the high group have the lowest average self-esteem); high standing students within groups did have higher self-esteem than did low standing students. These results suggest that within-group comparisons did have more impact on self-esteem than did across-group comparisons in this classroom.

While within-group comparisons affected self-esteem in the expected direction with high standing students having greater self-esteem, the effect was not large. One explanation for the lack of a stronger effect is that both comparison processes may have been operating to some degree and thus counteracting each other's influences. As mentioned previously, while some students would receive uniform information from both processes, others would receive conflicting information (i.e., the worst readers in the high groups and the best readers in the low groups). Table 3 shows the combined effect of group membership and within-group standing on student self-esteem.

These results indicate that the low standing students in the high groups had considerably lower self esteem than did other students. Thus the low average score for the high group appears to be due to the considerably lower self-esteem of the low standing students in that group.[7] These students received conflicting information from the two comparison processes which might have negatively affected their self-esteem.

A second explanation is that, if more praise was given to students with less ability and poorer performances, this could have offset the influence of social comparison processes on self-esteem. The results shown in Table 4 indicates that teacher praise corresponded inversely with group level, with students in the low group receiving the most praise. The relationship holds both for praise per line and praise per reader, indicating both that the teacher distributed praise unevenly across groups and that students in different groups received different amounts of praise. (Thus, it was not the case that high group members, for example, received less praise per line but the same amount of praise per reader because they read more lines.) This suggests that praise in the classroom was primarily used to encourage slower students to try harder.

If praise is primarily used for encouragement, it is likely that low standing students will also receive more praise. Table 5 shows teacher praise in the spring by group membership and within-group standing. In all four groups, low standing students received considerably more praise than did high standing students. Thus, the poorer readers in the low groups received the most praise of any students. This provides an explanation for their high self-esteem, despite receiving negative information from both comparison processes. On the other hand, while the poorer readers in the high group received more praise than the better readers in that group, they received considerably less praise than other low standing students. This provides an additional explanation for their relatively low self-esteem.[8]

Discussion

Students in this classroom were found to be more aware of rank-related differences between groups than they were of ability-related differences. While students showed increased awareness of

both types of differences throughout the year, almost half of the class failed to mention rank-related differences in the final interview and three-fourths did not mention differences in ability. Because of the relatively low degree of awareness regarding group differences in ability, both within-group standing and differential teacher praise had a stronger influence on students' self-esteem than did their group membership.

Although greater praise was given both to members of lower groups and to low-standing students, low-standing members of the high group did not receive as much praise as did either the high or low standing students in the low group. This combined with the greater salience of within-group comparison, produced relatively low self-esteem for these students. Thus, if group differences are minimized it is important to remember that high group members as well as low group members may be unaware of their own group status. Also, as across-group comparison is minimized, within-group comparison as a fairly constant process is likely to gain in relative importance. As a result, low standing students in the high groups may be in need of praise or encouragement to a much greater extent than one might anticipate given their relatively high ability.

It is also important to keep in mind that while group differences were effectively minimized in this classroom, they may be more difficult to obscure in later grades. Even during their first year of school students became more inquisitive about group differences, asking more questions of the teacher which, as they became more direct, were harder to avoid answering. Also as some students became aware of group differences, they passed this information on to other students. Since students, unlike adults, are unaware of the confidential nature of this information, students will have increasingly more sources of information to rely on which will provide them with information upon request.

Also, while the complexity of four level grouping appeared to make if more difficult for students to determine the relative order of groups, as groups became father apart, the order should become more obvious. Older students would be able to comprehend more complex groupings, so that unless the grouping also became more complex in the following years, more students are likely to determine the relative order of groups.

Further studies are needed to determine the extent to which students are aware of group differences in later grades. Also, while this study suggests that teacher praise and within-group comparisons had more influence on self-esteem than did across-group comparison, studies with larger samples of students are needed to determine the relative importance of these different processes in both early and later grades.

In addition, the combined influence of these processes needs to be examined further. In particular the effect of receiving conflicting information from two different comparison processes needs to be explored. Receiving unexpected information about oneself has been found to produce lower self-esteem (Smith and Bordonaro, 1975), as has having one's attention focused on oneself (Ickes, Wicklund, and Ferris, 1973). It is likely that one or both of these processes will occur when students receive conflicting information. Finally, the extent to which teachers adjust their use of praise for encouragement according to the more salient form of social comparison needs to be examined further. The results from this study suggest that teachers may continue to give greater encouragement to low ability students despite attempts to minimize across-group comparisons, forgetting that students' perceptions of ability are likely to differ from their own perceptions.

NOTES

[1]Within-classroom grouping refers to the formation of ability groups in order to instruct students in the same classroom in smaller, more homogeneous groups. Across-classroom grouping refers to assigning students with different aptitudes to separate classrooms.

[2]For a discussion on the selection of this classroom as well as for a more detailed description of the classroom see Eder (1979).

[3]Since the formation of several groups at the same level is relatively rare, the number of levels is usually equal to the number of groups.

[4]Originally answers to these questions were to be used as further evidence of awareness of group differences. However, student explanations for their choices indicated that they relied on a variety of reasons many of which did not relate to the ability differences of groups. Instead, answers were coded as to whether or not students made reference to rank-related differences between the groups. (Reference to ability-related differences were not counted since the questions themselves referred to such differences.)

[5]Relative standing was not computed for the fall tapes since students had not read aloud enough to obtain a reliable measure of reading difficulty.

[6]Due to the small size of the low group, the two lower groups were combined for this and following analyses.

[7]The individual scores of the low-standing students in the high group were 2, 3, 4, and 7 indicating that the low mean score was not due to outliers.

[8]When the effect of teacher praise on self-esteem was examined it was found to be positive but relatively small since it, in turn, is offset by the influence of comparison processes.

TABLE 1

Student Perception of Group Differences

	Number who mentioned rank-related difference	Number who mentioned ability-related difference	Number who mentioned either difference
Fall (24)*	0	0	0
Winter (23)	7	1	7
Spring (23)	12	5	13

*Class size.

TABLE 2

Effects of Group Membership and Within-Group Standing on Academic Self-Esteem*

			Self-Esteem	
		N	X	S
Group Membership	High	(7)	5.00	(2.00)
	Medium High	(7)	6.29	(2.08)
	Low**	(9)	6.11	(1.15)
Within-Group Standing	High	(10)	6.45	(1.76)
	Low	(13)	5.35	(3.28)

*As measured by eight items from Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory.

**Includes both of the lower groups.

TABLE 3

Combined Effect of Group Membership and

Within-Group Standing on Academic Self-Esteem*

	Self-Esteem			
	High Standing		Low Standing	
	X	s	X	s
High	6.33	(1.26)	4.00	(1.87)
Medium High	6.83	(.88)	5.88	(1.66)
Low**	6.25	(1.03)	6.00	(1.22)

*As measured by eight items from Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory.

**Includes both of the lower groups.

TABLE 4

Academic Praise by Ability Group

	Praise per Line			Praise per Reader		
	Year	Fall	Spring	Year	Fall	Spring
High	.083	.154	.063	.29	.22	.38
Medium High	.217	.362	.145	1.15	1.31	1.00
Low*	.350	.629	.207	1.92	2.33	1.50

*Includes both of the lower groups.

TABLE 5

Academic Praise by Ability Group and Relative Standing*

	Praise per Line		Praise per Reader	
	High Standing	Low Standing	High Standing	Low Standing
High	.023	.133	.14	.54
Medium High	.081	.256	.75	1.33
Low**	.155	.258	1.08	2.00

*Computed for spring data only.

**Includes both of the lower groups.

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